

BOYS' LIFE

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The Liechtenstein Flash

BY JACK RITCHIE
Illustrated By Don Weller

"I will steal bases," Ludwig said.

We have this exchange-student pact in which Robert Louis Stevenson High School ships a student to Liechtenstein each year and Liechtenstein sends us one of theirs.

This year, we got Ludwig Moldenauer, who stands about five-foot-two and must weigh all of 110 pounds.

Liechtenstein is 62 square miles of mostly mountains between Switzerland and Austria, both of which are in Europe. The country has a population of about 30,000 people, and according to my encyclopedia, it gets most of its income from tourism, from the sale of postage stamps and "from

After analyzing his aptitudes and potentials, Ludwig had decided he'd specialize in base-stealing. However, the coach had to point out that before you can steal a base, you first have to get on one.

international-trade firms that maintain corporate headquarters there." All of which sounds profitable, especially that last part.

Ludwig is boarding at our house, and he came to us last September. Even with always doing his homework on time—he's a straight A student—he always managed to be in front of the TV set whenever there was a baseball game on—like at the end of the regular big league season and during the World Series. He asked me a lot of questions about baseball, which is my game, and I was always glad to answer them.

But he didn't tell me what he had in mind until the end of winter and the beginning of spring baseball practice at Stevenson. That's when he told me he was going out for baseball and he was going to specialize in stealing bases.

Ludwig explained it. "When, through competitive examinations and a little politics, I discovered that I was to be an exchange student, I realized that in order to maintain the tradition of my Liechtenstein predecessors at your school, I must take up some form of athletics and excel at it.

"I dismissed football immediately for obvious reasons. Even as a place kicker, I would have failed, since I did not even play soccer in Liechtenstein.

"However, I analyzed my potentials, my aptitudes, as they would apply to your great national sport of baseball, and I realized there was room for me. I could be outstanding in this

matter of base-stealing, for I am swift, keen of perception, and can accelerate from a stationary position to a full run in a matter of two strides."

So there I was, taking Ludwig to our first spring practice. This is my third year with the team—I'm the varsity shortstop—and to tell you the truth, I felt a little embarrassed about bringing Ludwig with me, but I couldn't see how I could get out of it.

Anyway, I got him a uniform, which last year belonged to our freshman bat boy, and took him out onto the practice field and introduced him to Coach Johnson.

The coach listened to Ludwig and looked him over. I could see the coach had his doubts too, but he took Ludwig out to the diamond, stopped practice, set up a stealing situation and told Ludwig to do his thing.

Fred Tracey was on the mound. He looked at Ludwig dancing off first base and didn't feel even a little threatened. But he made a couple of tosses to first anyway, and Ludwig got back to the bag without any trouble.

Finally Tracey took his abbreviated wind up and pitched the ball to Porter, our catcher. Ludwig was off with the pitch, and he was right about being in full gear after two steps. Porter took the pitch and made a perfect toss to second, but it was too late. Ludwig was in—safe.

The coach was impressed and surprised, and so was I.

To make sure it wasn't a fluke, Coach Johnson put Ludwig back on first and told him to try again. He did, and stole second once more.

Most of the time when somebody steals a base, he does it off the pitcher, not the catcher, and it looked like Ludwig had the instinct for reading that exact second when the pitcher commits himself to throwing to the plate.

Ludwig stole second four more times.

Coach Johnson was beginning to think he had something there. At least a pinch runner.

He tried for more. "Ludwig, in order to steal a lot of bases, you first have to get on base. How are you at batting?"

"I do not know yet," Ludwig admitted. "However, I have an eagle eye and rapid reflexes, and I believe I should do quite well."

The coach put Ludwig in the batter's box and had Tracey pitch to him.

Tracey was still a little hot from having all those bases





By our ninth win Ludwig already had more stolen bases under his belt than anyone else had managed to get in an entire season. But then people began to notice something else about Ludwig that might mean big trouble for us.

It went on like that. Frankly, with the exception of Ludwig, we were sort of an average team. But partly because of Ludwig's base-running and partly because of luck, we managed to win eight straight games. For the first time in 10 years, we were beginning to think about the Fox River Valley Conference title.

Everybody in the conference had at least heard of Ludwig's base-running. By the time we'd won our ninth game, 3 to 2 (Ludwig had stolen home for the winning run), he already had more bases under his belt than anyone else had ever managed to get in an entire season of 12 games.

Ludwig was especially proud of stealing home. "At stealing second, I am superb, and the fact that it is the base farthest from the catcher does not hurt either. I am also excellent at stealing third. However, to steal home is a different proposition entirely. In order to do this, I must catch the pitcher, the catcher, or preferably both, by surprise. They must not even suspect I will make the attempt."

People, though, had begun to notice something else about Ludwig—his hitting—and the fact that his hits never went too far.

So in our 10th game, with our arch rival Edgar Allan Poe High, when Ludwig stepped into the batter's box to start the game, he found all the outfielders had been drawn in almost to the infield grass. In other words, what it really amounted to was an eight-man infield, and nobody at all worried that Ludwig might hit the ball over his head.

With all the holes plugged, Ludwig had no place to hit. He grounded out four times, once by being thrown out by the right fielder, who was that close to first.

The strategy wasn't the crucial factor in that particular game: We were clobbered 11 to 0 for our first loss of the season. The crucial factor was that the information about Ludwig's weakness at the bat entered into what you could call the public domain.

In our 11th game, with Whitman, Ludwig faced that eight-man infield again. He didn't even draw a walk.

But luck was with us, and even with Ludwig bottled up, we won the game 4 to 2. That gave us a 10 and 1 record going into the last game of the season.

After the game with Whitman, Ludwig sighed. "My hitting days are over, and I have become a burden. For the good of the team, I think it is best for me to withdraw from the lineup. Perhaps I could still be of some use as a pinch runner."

But Coach Johnson figured he'd gone with Ludwig all season and it wasn't the time to change, and maybe something would turn up.

Our 12th and last game of the season was with Longfellow High, another arch-rival that had a record of 3 and 8 and was going nowhere. Despite Longfellow's record, we had to be sure to win that last game. Otherwise, we'd share the pennant with E. R. Burroughs High, which had played the day before and finished the season with a 10 and 2 record.

Longfellow High also used the Ludwig shift. In his first three times up, Ludwig grounded out, and once again an outfielder was responsible for one of the throws to first.

Longfellow High seemed to like the role of the spoiler, because it played one of its better games. By the time we got up to bat in the bottom of the ninth, the score was tied, 1 to 1.

Ludwig led off our half of the inning. I guess that the Longfellow pitcher was tiring because he walked Ludwig.

I was up next, and the coach sent me up to the plate with instructions not to hit the ball until Ludwig got a chance to steal second. Then I was to sacrifice Ludwig to third, where he

Continued on page 64

stolen off him, so he really blazed one in.

Ludwig was right, too, about his eagle eye and those reflexes. He hit the pitch to the left of second base, and if it had been in a game, it would have been a hit.

Tracey kept pitching, but he didn't get much past Ludwig. He peppered balls all over the infield until the coach called a halt to the proceedings.

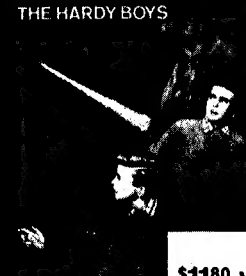
Well, we had ourselves a secret weapon: Ludwig. But I noticed that of all those balls he hit, only one had been out of the infield, and that one not by much.

In other words, Ludwig wasn't exactly a long-ball hitter. But still, we had somebody who'd probably never strike out, could run like a whippet and, even if he batted only .250 or less, was still good enough to get a spot on the team.

The only thing Ludwig had to work real hard at was handling the glove. But he was quick to learn and could throw fairly well, even though he'd never win the Golden Glove award. By the time our season started, the coach had stationed Ludwig out there on second base.

Our first game was with Hawthorne High. Ludwig, as lead-off batter, got to bat five times. He made two hits, through the infield of course, walked once, and stole three bases, including third. We won the game 4 to 3, and that was a nice way to start the season.

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The Liechtenstein Flash

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would be in position to score on a long fly ball.

The Longfellow pitcher drove Ludwig back to the bag four times before the pitcher finally decided to pitch to me. When he did, Ludwig took off for second. The catcher's throw wasn't too good, but Ludwig would have made it anyway.

The pitcher turned back to me. When

**WHEN WE GOT UP TO BAT
IN THE LAST INNING,
THE SCORE WAS STILL TIED.
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A BASE — NOT A SINGLE ONE.**

the ball came in, I laid down a bunt along the first base line. The pitcher came over to field it, but he bobbled the ball, and I made it to first.

With the winning run on third and nobody out, the Longfellow coach decided it was time to change pitchers. He put in Danny Oglethorpe.

Oglethorpe's got only one pitch—forward. But that comes in at close to 100 miles per hour, and Oglethorpe's been known to strike out a side on nine pitched balls.

He stands six foot eight inches tall and about two inches wide. That means he has plenty of leverage to burn in those pitches, but no stamina. He's good for about 25 pitches or two innings, whichever comes first; so he's used only as a relief pitcher.

Our next batter was Harrison. In a situation like that, with men on first and third and nobody out, most managers would have walked Harrison to put a chance for an out on every base. But the Longfellow coach must have had a lot of confidence in Oglethorpe, or Oglethorpe had a lot of confidence in himself, because he came to the mound to pitch, not to walk anybody.

He struck out Harrison on three straight pitches. He did the same thing to Nelson, our cleanup hitter.

That brought up Adams, our center fielder.

I looked at Ludwig on third. Could he steal home? No, he didn't have one of his surprise situations. They were waiting for him to just try it. Ludwig wasn't going anywhere.

I looked at second base. I was in my senior year and my third year on the varsity. In all that time and all those games, I'd never stolen a base. Or even tried.

If I was going to steal a base, the time was now. This was the last game of my high school career.

And nobody *expected* me to steal. Not only because I'm on the slow side, but also because there was no point in stealing second. We already had what could be the winning run on third.

But with Ludwig stymied at third, and Adams about to strike out—I could feel that was in the cards—what real harm would it do if I surprised everybody by stealing second?

When Adams stepped into the batter's box, I edged off first base and took a long lead. Too long, I guess. Oglethorpe eyed me, and finally he just couldn't resist the quick and sure out. He fired the ball to the first baseman.

If I'd tried to get back to the bag, I would have been out. There was nothing for me to do except head for second.

The first baseman threw to second. If I would have tried to slide in, I would have been an easy out. So I stopped in my tracks and stood on the base path wondering what to do next.

The second baseman blinked when he saw I wasn't coming any closer. Then he took a couple of steps toward me.

And then, suddenly, there was the catcher at home plate yelling that he wanted the ball—and quick.

While I'd been doing my running and stopping, Ludwig had headed for home plate. The second baseman woke up and threw to home, but it was too late. Ludwig slid in safe before the ball reached the catcher's mitt.

And that was it. The game, the pennant, the whole ball of wax, and we voted Ludwig the Most Valuable Player of the Year, even though his batting average had slipped to .167.

When the coach finally talked to me, he said, "Well, everything turned out all right, but that was just about the most bone-headed..."

Ludwig quickly cut in. "That was magnificent strategy on your part—*pretending* you were going to steal second so that attention would be diverted from me and I could steal home."

I cleared my throat. "Well, actually..."

Ludwig took me by the elbow and got me out of there before I could say anything more.

When Ludwig and I walked home, I was still brooding about a certain bone-headed play.

He tried to cheer me up. "On the other hand, you may have consciously believed that you were really trying to steal second, but *subconsciously* you actually intended to create the diversion."

It was a nice try, and I appreciated it. We stopped in at the malt shop, and I bought Ludwig the biggest hot fudge sundae they had in the house. ♦